

# Saving stranded sea lion pups



This sea lion was taken to Marine Mammal Center in Sausalito after roadside rescue in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. Photo courtesy GGNRA

By Jessie Faulkner, [jfaulkner@times-standard.com](mailto:jfaulkner@times-standard.com) *It's not a good time for California sea lion pups.*

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In the past few weeks, marine mammal rehabilitation centers all along the California coast have been rescuing starving 6-to 7-month-old pups discovered on the state's beaches.

The situation is considerably worse in Southern California, home to the marine mammal's nesting grounds surrounding the Channel Islands off Santa Barbara, but the suffering pups are making their way north in a desperate search for food.

Since late January, the staff and volunteers of the Crescent City-based North Coast Marine Mammal Center have rescued five underweight sea lion pups, the most recent on Thursday at Humboldt Bay's North Jetty. Two of the five were rescued previously in Southern California, cared for until they reached their normal weight, and released only to have lost the weight and again find themselves struggling to survive.

North Coast Marine Mammal Center Stranding Coordinator Lynda Stockton was in the process of rescuing the latest struggling pup when contacted earlier this week. It didn't look good, she said.

The affected sea lion pups are part of last year's birth cycle and should now, at age of 6 to 7 months, weigh in

at 60 to 70 pounds. Most of the stranded pups weigh just 20 to 40 pounds, said Dennis Wood, veterinarian and North Coast Marine Mammal Center founder. When the pups' weight dips below 20 pounds the chance of recovery greatly diminishes.

"They're weak and they're skinny, they look like little skeletons," he said.

Unfortunately, it's a situation that marine mammal rescue centers have seen before. In 2013, rescue centers throughout California were finding and rehabilitating starving sea lion pups.

"It's early in the event and it looks like and feels like and smells like the same starving sea lions we saw in 2013," he said.

The difference is the current situation is worse, Wood added. The centers throughout the state are seeing some five times the number of stranded sea lion pups than is normal and many more than were helped in 2013.

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"We have approximately twice the number of strandings this January than we had in 2013," Wood said.

A similar situation developed in 1998 during an El Nino year, a situation when sea water temperatures are higher than normal.

Thus far, 2015 isn't seeing an El Nino situation, Wood said. Several theories are developing as to the cause of the current situation. Among the fish species that provide sustenance for the growing sea lion pups are sardines, anchovies, Pacific Hake, rockfish and squid. Experts point to the shifting of sardine spawning grounds further offshore, meaning less sustenance for the nursing mothers and less milk for the pups.

In 2013, Wood said, there was a great deal of necropsy work on the pups that perished. The current situation, he said, has similar hallmarks.

While the rescuing of the individual sea lion pups receives most of the attention, it is a minor part of the current quandary, Wood said. It's much more about information gathering from a sentinel species — a species like the canary in the coal mine — that reflects the health of the ocean.

Thus far, the sea lion pups rescued in Humboldt and Del Norte counties haven't been found to have any infections or diseases; in a weakened state, the marine mammals are more susceptible to such possibilities. They're dehydrated and have internal parasites such as stomach worms, which is not unusual, Wood said. The animals are being treated for the parasites, receiving vitamin and mineral supplements and, of course, fish.

California sea lions have the advantage of being pretty aggressive eaters, Wood said, so volunteers do not have to teach the pups how to catch fish, unlike rescued harbor seals.

While the future is uncertain for all five of the sea lion pups now at the Crescent City center, the two rescued previously, face additional challenges.

The Northcoast Marine Mammal Center operates under a memorandum of understanding with the National Marine Fisheries. Part of the accepted guidelines is not releasing animals who have been previously rehabilitated. Generally, Wood said, the animals are transferred to a captive situation — such as an aquarium or the U.S. Navy Marine Mammal Program.

“It's going to be considered because it's part of our guidelines,” he added.

Help is needed,

The Northcoast Marine Mammal Center is almost entirely operated by volunteers and help is needed. That can range from rescuing animals from local beaches to feedings, cleaning facilities and more.

“We need eyes and we need money,” stranding coordinator Stockton said. “Any little bit helps.”